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See no evil, hear no evil, vape no evil; the irresponsible promotion of e-cigarettes and Swaptober

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The House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee have launched an inquiry into e-cigarette impact, implications and regulation.¹ National guidance for improving health should be evidence-based, with a complete understanding of what is disseminated and encouraged. However, despite significant gaps in research, e-cigarettes are promoted as part of smoking cessation efforts including the Public Health England (PHE) Campaign, One You.² Should a suggested lesser evil in e-cigarettes, be promoted when there is insufficient evidence of their long-term impact?

Stoptober is a 28-day PHE initiative that occurs annually in October, with the aim of supporting smokers to quit the habit. In 2017, the campaign began promoting e-cigarettes, which as stated by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE), are devices that are not understood in terms of the long-term health benefits or harms.³ Promotion of e-cigarettes features in the PHE campaign, One You.² The addition to this year's mass media is even more surprising when there is at best, very low-quality evidence of e-cigarettes promoting smoking cessation or reduction,⁴ and insufficient data for confident effect size estimation.⁵ Hence, the presentation of e-cigarettes alongside evidence-based medicinal products (licensed nicotine-replacement therapy) seems premature and its portrayal under the message of being 'five times more likely to quit' is misleading. The Independent British Vape Trade Association sponsors Stoptober; which amongst other activity, promotes the vape industry and thus, presents a potential conflict of interest. A further concern is the evidence of e-cigarette use in UK children.⁶ Preliminary evidence also suggests that e-cigarette use may have deleterious effects in relevant patient groups (e.g. COPD). Given that further understanding of the health implications of e-cigarettes is needed, promotion to the public including youth and vulnerable populations at risk of shorter-term effects, is not an appropriate implementation strategy.

An emerging concern is Swaptober, another annual October initiative. Launched in 2016, Swaptober aims to convert smokers from traditional cigarettes to e-cigarettes, and is promoted in support of Stoptober. E-cigarettes are promoted as a healthier alternative to smoking; particularly as a first step towards smoking cessation for people finding it difficult to stop. However, e-cigarette companies do not encourage smoking cessation, but alternatively to make a long-term swap. Thus, Swaptober, which occurs at the same time as Stoptober, could overshadow and reduce the effectiveness of Stoptober. In line with NICE guidance,³ smoking cessation should be encouraged not to swap to an alternative that to date is not fully understood. PHE have reported and subsequently been key in publicising the expert opinion that e-cigarettes are 95% safer than tobacco.⁷ The credibility of this estimate has been questioned, and referred to as a premature debate about devices that warrant rigorous safety assessment.

NICE called for caution regarding recommendations for e-cigarettes as a suitable alternative due to the lack of evidence regarding the long-term health effects.³ This contradicts the views of PHE and the Royal College of Physicians,^{7,8} advocating wide promotion of e-cigarettes as a substitute for smoking. The contradictory stance of the UK's expert health organisations is

likely to confuse public understanding. The inclusion of e-cigarettes in mass media campaigns is another example of short-term gain irrespective of the possible long-term pain. Despite the divide in e-cigarette opinion, all would accept the need for a balanced approach to e-cigarette regulation. The House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee inquiry¹ will likely highlight key gaps of evidence regarding the health benefits or harms of e-cigarettes, which need addressing prior to any further public promotion. Until there is substantial evidence on the health implications of e-cigarettes, it is irresponsible, unethical and potentially harmful for health organisations to promote e-cigarettes.

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